



ARE YOUR WINTER BLAHS CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

Ever feel like it's difficult to get out of bed on cold, dark winter days? Ask your friends and family, and you'll find that eating and sleeping more, having less energy, and feeling a touch of the blahs when the days grow shorter are quite common. Usually, it's nothing to worry about.

If you experience a recurrent pattern of more severe symptoms, however, you may have a depressive disorder called seasonal affective disorder, or SAD.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF SAD?

Seasonal affective disorder is a cyclical condition, with symptoms primarily present during the winter months. For most sufferers, the signs of SAD begin as winter sets in and recede during the spring and summer. Symptoms of SAD include persistent lethargy, social withdrawal, anxiety, general depression, excessive sleepiness and carbohydrate cravings.

WHAT CAUSES SAD

While there's no proven cause for seasonal affective disorder, it appears that (as with other forms of depression) heredity plays some role. It is more common in women, usually beginning after age 20. The risk of developing SAD decreases with age.

Reduced sunlight seems to be a significant factor: the farther north you go the more common SAD becomes. This may be because reduced sunlight disrupts the internal circadian rhythms that tell you when to sleep and when to wake; because of increased production of the sleep-related hormone melatonin (thought to contribute to depression); and/or because of lowered levels of serotonin (a brain chemical that seems to be triggered by sunlight).

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

If you're experiencing symptoms of depression, visit your doctor or call MHN, your EAP provider. SAD and other depressive disorders can be effectively managed. If you are diagnosed with SAD, treatment options include light therapy, counseling and medication (or some combination of the three). Light therapy, which involves sitting by a special, very bright lamp for 30 minutes or more per day, is effective for nearly 70 percent of SAD patients.¹

Whatever your treatment, the following tips may help you cope with SAD – or less serious winter blues:

- **Let there be light.** Open curtains and blinds to let as much natural light as possible into your home.
- **Bundle up and get outside.** Take advantage of sunny days – even if it's cold – to get outside for exercise, errands or social activities. A bit of fresh air might perk you up even on gloomy days.

¹ "Seasonal affective disorder," Mayo Clinic staff, Sept. 29, 2006. Accessed online January 4, 2007 at: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/seasonal-affective-disorder/DS00195/>.

- **Exercise.** Exercise is a mood enhancer, but motivation can be difficult to come by when you're depressed. So set yourself a schedule and stick to it: start each day with a brisk walk outside, find a workout you can do indoors at a set time, or sign up for a group exercise class.
- **Head south for the winter.** Taking a trip to a warmer, sunnier destination may provide a welcome respite from your symptoms. If you usually take an extended vacation in summer, consider a winter trip instead.

CALL YOUR EAP FOR CONFIDENTIAL, PROFESSIONAL HELP

Face-to-face and telephonic consultations are available to help you with depression, stress, anxiety and other emotional health and work-life issues.* Call **any time** for assessment, assistance and referral to additional services.

(866) EAP-4SOC

(866) 327-4672

TDD callers: (800) 327-0801

Or visit us online at:

www.eap4soc.mhn.com

(register with the access code "SOC")

Click on "emotional health" for depression self-assessment and self-help programs, helpful articles, or to find a provider who can help you.

*Call the number above or your benefits administrator to find out how many counseling sessions you're eligible to receive. Benefits may vary depending on your eligibility and employment type.

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